

# The Three Clerks Of Saint Nicholas

Honore de Balzac

The Inn of the Three Barbels was formerly at Tours, the best place in the town for sumptuous fare; and the landlord, reputed the best of cooks, went to prepare wedding breakfasts as far as Chatelherault, Loches, Vendome, and Blois. This said man, an old fox, perfect in his business, never lighted lamps in the day time, knew how to skin a flint, charged for wool, leather, and feathers, had an eye to everything, did not easily let anyone pay with chaff instead of coin, and for a penny less than his account would have affronted even a prince. For the rest, he was a good banterer, drinking and laughing with his regular customers, hat in hand always before the persons furnished with plenary indulgences entitled *Sit nomen Domini benedictum*, running them into expense, and proving to them, if need were, by sound argument, that wines were dear, and that whatever they might think, nothing was given away in Touraine, everything had to be bought, and, at the same time, paid for. In short, if he could without disgrace have done so, he would have reckoned so much for the good air, and so much for the view of the country. Thus he built up a tidy fortune with other people's money, became as round as a butt, larded with fat, and was called Monsieur. At the time of the last fair three young fellows, who were apprentices in knavery, in whom there was more of the material that makes thieves than saints, and who knew just how far it was possible to go without catching their necks in the branches of trees, made up their minds to amuse themselves, and live well, condemning certain hawkers or others in all the expenses. Now these limbs of Satan gave the slip to their masters, under whom they had been studying the art of parchment scrawling, and came to stay at the hotel of the Three Barbels, where they demanded the best rooms, turned the place inside out, turned up their noses at everything, bespoke all the lampreys in the market, and announced themselves as first-class merchants, who never carried their goods with them, and travelled only with their persons. The host bustled about, turned the spits, and prepared a glorious repast, for these three dodgers, who had already made noise enough for a hundred crowns, and who most certainly would not even have given up the copper coins which one of them was jingling in his pocket. But if they were hard up for money they did not want for ingenuity, and all three arranged to play their parts like thieves at a fair. Theirs was a farce in which there was plenty of eating and drinking, since for five days they so heartily attacked every kind of provision that a party of German soldiers would have spoiled less than they obtained by fraud. These three cunning fellows made their way to the fair after breakfast, well primed, gorged, and big in the belly, and did as they liked with the greenhorns and others, robbing, filching, playing, and losing, taking down the writings and signs and changing them, putting that of the toyman over the jeweller's, and that of the jeweller's outside the shoe maker's, turning the shops inside out, making the dogs fight, cutting the ropes of tethered horses, throwing cats among the crowd, crying, "Stop thief!" And saying to every one they met, "Are you not Monsieur D'Enterfesse of Angiers?" Then they hustled everyone, making holes in the sacks of flour, looking for their handkerchiefs in ladies' pockets, raising their skirts, crying, looking for a lost jewel and saying to them--

"Ladies, it has fallen into a hole!"

They directed the little children wrongly, slapped the stomachs of those who were gaping in the air, and prowled about, fleecing and annoying every one. In short, the devil would have

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been a gentleman in comparison with these blackguard students, who would have been hanged rather than do an honest action; as well have expected charity from two angry litigants. They left the fair, not fatigued, but tired of ill-doing, and spent the remainder of their time over dinner until the evening when they recommenced their pranks by torchlight. After the peddlers, they commenced operations on the ladies of the town, to whom, by a thousand dodges, they gave only that which they received, according to the axiom of Justinian: Cuiquum jus tribuere. "To every one his own juice;" and afterwards jokingly said to the poor wenches--

"We are in the right and you are in the wrong."

At last, at supper-time, having nothing else to do, they began to knock each other about, and to keep the game alive, complained of the flies to the landlord, remonstrating with him that elsewhere the innkeepers had them caught in order that gentleman of position might not be annoyed by them. However, towards the fifth day, which is the critical day of fevers, the host not having seen, although he kept his eyes wide open, the royal surface of a crown, and knowing that if all that glittered were gold it would be cheaper, began to knit his brows and go more slowly about that which his high-class merchants required of him. Fearing that he had made a bad bargain with them, he tried to sound the depth of their pockets; perceiving which the three clerks ordered him with the assurance of a Provost hanging his man, to serve them quickly with a good supper as they had to depart immediately. Their merry countenances dismissed the host's suspicions. Thinking that rogues without money would certainly look grave, he prepared a supper worthy of a canon, wishing even to see them drunk, in order the more easily to clap them in jail in the event of an accident. Not knowing how to make their escape from the room, in which they were about as much at their ease as are fish upon straw, the three companions ate and drank immoderately, looking at the situation of the windows, waiting the moment to decamp, but not getting the opportunity. Cursing their luck, one of them wished to go and undo his waistcoat, on account of a colic, the other to fetch a doctor to the third, who did his best to faint. The cursed landlord kept dodging about from the kitchen into the room, and from the room into the kitchen, watching the nameless ones, and going a step forward to save his crowns, and going a step back to save his crown, in case they should be real gentlemen; and he acted like a brave and prudent host who likes halfpence and objects to kicks; but under pretence of properly attending to them, he always had an ear in the room, and a foot in the court; fancied he was always being called by them, came every time they laughed, showing them a face with an unsettled look upon it, and always said, "Gentlemen, what is your pleasure?" This was an interrogatory in reply to which they would willingly have given him ten inches of his own spit in his stomach, because he appeared as if he knew very well what would please them at this juncture, seeing that to have twenty crowns, full weight, they would each of them have sold a third of his eternity. You can imagine they sat on their seats as if they were gridirons, that their feet itched and their posteriors were rather warm. Already the host had put the pears, the cheese, and the preserves near their noses, but they, sipping their liquor, and picking at the dishes, looked at each other to see if either of them had found a good piece of roguery in his sack, and they all began to enjoy themselves rather woefully. The most cunning of the three clerks, who was a Burgundian, smiled and said, seeing the hour of payment arrived, "This must stand over for a week," as if they had been at the Palais de Justice. The two others, in spite of the danger, began to laugh.

"What do we owe?" asked he who had in his belt the heretofore mentioned twelve sols and

he turned them about as though he would make them breed little ones by this excited movement. He was a native of Picardy, and very passionate; a man to take offence at anything in order that he might throw the landlord out the window in all security of conscience. Now he said these words with the air of a man of immense wealth.

"Six crowns, gentlemen," replied the host, holding out his hand.

"I cannot permit myself to be entertained by you alone, Viscount," said the third student, who was from Anjou, and as artful as a woman in love.

"Neither can I," said the Burgundian.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" replied the Picardian "you are jesting. I am yours to command."

"Sambreguoy!" cried he of Anjou. "You will not let us pay three times; our host would not suffer it."

"Well then," said the Burgundian, "whichever of us shall tell the worst tale shall justify the landlord."

"Who will be the judge?" asked the Picardian, dropping his twelve sols to the bottom of his pocket.

"Pardieu! our host. He should be capable, seeing that he is a man of taste," said he of Anjou. "Come along, great chef, sit you down, drink, and lend us both your ears. The audience is open."

Thereupon the host sat down, but not until he had poured out a gobletful of wine.

"My turn first," said the Anjou man. "I commence."

"In our Duchy of Anjou, the country people are very faithful servants to our Holy of Catholic religion, and none of them will lose his portion of paradise for lack of doing penance or killing a heretic. If a professor of heresy passed that way, he quickly found himself under the grass, without knowing whence his death had proceeded. A good man of Larze, returning one night from his evening prayer to the wine flasks of Pomme-de-Pin, where he had left his understanding and memory, fell into a ditch full of water near his house, and found he was up to his neck. One of the neighbours finding him shortly afterwards nearly frozen, for it was winter time, said jokingly to him--

"'Hulloa! What are you waiting for there?'

"'A thaw', said the tipsy fellow, finding himself held by the ice.

"Then Godenot, like a good Christian, released him from his dilemma, and opened the door of the house to him, out of respect to the wine, which is lord of this country. The good man then went and got into the bed of the maid-servant, who was a young and pretty wench. The old bungler, bemuddled with wine, went ploughing in the wrong land, fancying all the time it was his wife by his side, and thanking her for the youth and freshness she still retained.

On hearing her husband, the wife began to cry out, and by her terrible shrieks the man was awakened to the fact that he was not in the road to salvation, which made the poor labourer sorrowful beyond expression.

"Ah! said he; 'God has punished me for not going to vespers at Church.'

"And he began to excuse himself as best he could, saying, that the wine had muddled his understanding, and getting into his own bed he kept repeating to his good wife, that for his best cow he would not have had this sin upon his conscience.

"My dear', said she, 'go and confess the first thing tomorrow morning, and let us say no more about it.'

"The good man trotted to confessional, and related his case with all humility to the rector of the parish, who was a good old priest, capable of being up above, the slipper of the holy foot.

"An error is not a sin,' said he to the penitent. 'You will fast tomorrow, and be absolved.'

"Fast!--with pleasure,' said the good man. 'That does not mean go without drink.'

"Oh!' replied the rector, 'you must drink water, and eat nothing but a quarter of a loaf and an apple.'

"Then the good man, who had no confidence in his memory, went home, repeating to himself the penance ordered. But having loyally commenced with a quarter of a loaf and an apple, he arrived at home, saying, a quarter of apples, and a loaf.

"Then, to purify his soul, he set about accomplishing his fast, and his good woman having given him a loaf from the safe, and unhooked a string of apples from the beam, he set sorrowfully to work. As he heaved a sigh on taking the last mouthful of bread hardly knowing where to put it, for he was full to the chin, his wife remonstrated with him, that God did not desire the death of a sinner, and that for lack of putting a crust of bread in his belly, he would not be reproached for having put things in their wrong places.

"Hold your tongue, wife!' said he. 'If it chokes me, I must fast.'"

"I've payed my share, it's your turn, Viscount," added he of Anjou, giving the Picardian a knowing wink.

"The goblets are empty. Hi, there! More wine."

"Let us drink," cried the Picardian. "Moist stories slip out easier."

At the same time he tossed off a glassful without leaving a drop at the bottom, and after a preliminary little cough, he related the following:--

"You must know that the maids of Picardy, before setting up housekeeping, are accustomed honestly to gain their linen, vessels, and chests; in short, all the needed household utensils.

To accomplish this, they go into service in Peronne, Abbeville, Amiens, and other towns, where they are tire-women, wash up glasses, clean plates, fold linen, and carry up the dinner, or anything that there is to be carried. They are all married as soon as they possess something else besides that which they naturally bring to their husbands. These women are the best housewives, because they understand the business and everything else thoroughly. One belonging to Azonville, which is the land of which I am lord by inheritance, having heard speak of Paris, where the people did not put themselves out of the way for anyone, and where one could subsist for a whole day by passing the cook's shops, and smelling the steam, so fattening was it, took it into her head to go there. She trudged bravely along the road, and arrived with a pocket full of emptiness. There she fell in, at the Porte St. Denise, with a company of soldiers, placed there for a time as a vidette, for the Protestants had assumed a dangerous attitude. The sergeant seeing this hooded linnnet coming, stuck his headpiece on one side, straightened his feather, twisted his moustache, cleared his throat, rolled his eyes, put his hand on his hips, and stopped the Picardian to see if her ears were properly pierced, since it was forbidden to girls to enter otherwise into Paris. Then he asked her, by way of a joke, but with a serious face, what brought her there, he pretending to believe she had come to take the keys of Paris by assault. To which the poor innocent replied, that she was in search of a good situation, and had no evil intentions, only desiring to gain something.

"Very well; I will employ you,' said the wag. 'I am from Picardy, and will get you taken in here, where you will be treated as a queen would often like to be, and you will be able to make a good thing of it.'

"Then he led her to the guard-house, where he told her to sweep the floor, polish the saucepans, stir the fire, and keep a watch on everything, adding that she should have thirty sols a head from the men if their service pleased her. Now seeing that the squad was there for a month, she would be able to gain ten crowns, and at their departure would find fresh arrivals who would make good arrangements with her, and by this means she would be able to take back money and presents to her people. The girl cleaned the room and prepared the meals so well, singing and humming, that this day the soldiers found in their den the look of a monk's refectory. Then all being well content, each of them gave a sol to their handmaiden. Well satisfied, they put her into the bed of their commandant, who was in town with his lady, and they petted and caressed her after the manner of philosophical soldiers, that is, soldiers partial to that which is good. She was soon comfortably ensconced between the sheets. But to avoid quarrels and strife, my noble warriors drew lots for their turn, arranged themselves in single file, playing well at Pique hardie, saying not a word, but each one taking at least twenty-six sols worth of the girl's society. Although not accustomed to work for so many, the poor girl did her best, and by this means never closed her eyes the whole night. In the morning, seeing the soldiers were fast asleep, she rose happy at bearing no marks of the sharp skirmish, and although slightly fatigued, managed to get across the fields into the open country with her thirty sols. On the route to Picardy, she met one of her friends, who, like herself, wished to try service in Paris, and was hurrying thither, and seeing her, asked her what sort of places they were.

"Ah! Perrine; do not go. You want to be made of iron, and even if you were it would soon be worn away,' was the answer.

"Now, big-belly of Burgundy," said he, giving his neighbour a hearty slap, "spit out your

story or pay!"

"By the queen of Antlers!" replied the Burgundian, "by my faith, by the saints, by God! and by the devil, I know only stories of the Court of Burgundy, which are only current coin in our own land."

"Eh, ventre Dieu! are we not in the land of Beaufremont?" cried the other, pointing to the empty goblets.

"I will tell you, then, an adventure well known at Dijon, which happened at the time I was in command there, and was worth being written down. There was a sergeant of justice named Franc-Taupin, who was an old lump of mischief, always grumbling, always fighting; stiff and starchy, and never comforting those he was leading to the hulks, with little jokes by the way; and in short, he was just the man to find lice in bald heads, and bad behaviour in the Almighty. This said Taupin, spurned by every one, took unto himself a wife, and by chance he was blessed with one as mild as the peel of an onion, who, noticing the peculiar humour of her husband, took more pains to bring joy to his house than would another to bestow horns upon him. But although she was careful to obey him in all things, and to live at peace would have tried to excrete gold for him, had God permitted it, this man was always surly and crabbed, and no more spared his wife blows, than does a debtor promises to the bailiff's man. This unpleasant treatment continuing in spite of the carefulness and angelic behaviour of the poor woman, she being unable to accustom herself to it, was compelled to inform her relations, who thereupon came to the house. When they arrived, the husband declared to them that his wife was an idiot, that she displeased him in every possible way, and made his life almost unbearable; that she would wake him out of his first sleep, never came to the door when he knocked, but would leave him out in the rain and the cold, and that the house was always untidy. His garments were buttonless, his laces wanted tags. The linen was spoiling, the wine turning sour, the wood damp, and the bed was always creaking at unreasonable moments. In short, everything was going wrong. To this tissue of falsehoods, the wife replied by pointing to the clothes and things, all in a state of thorough repair. Then the sergeant said that he was very badly treated, that his dinner was never ready for him, or if it was, the broth was thin or the soup cold, either the wine or the glasses were forgotten, the meat was without gravy or parsley, the mustard had turned, he either found hairs in the dish or the cloth was dirty and took away his appetite, indeed nothing did she ever get for him that was to his liking. The wife, astonished, contented herself with stoutly denying the fault imputed to her. 'Ah,' said he, 'you dirty hussy! You deny it, do you! Very well then, my friends, you come and dine here to-day, you shall be witnesses of her misconduct. And if she can for once serve me properly, I will confess myself wrong in all I have stated, and will never lift my hand against her again, but will resign to her my halberd and my breeches, and give her full authority here.'

"Oh, well,' said she, joyfully, 'I shall then henceforth be both wife and mistress!'

"Then the husband, confident of the nature and imperfections of his wife, desired that the dinner should be served under the vine arbor, thinking that he would be able to shout at her if she did not hurry quickly enough from the table to the pantry. The good housewife set to work with a will. The plates were clean enough to see one's face in, the mustard was fresh and well made, the dinner beautifully cooked, as appetising as stolen fruit; the glasses were clear, the wine was cool, and everything so nice, so clean and white, that the repast would

have done honour to a bishop's chatterbox. Just as she was standing before the table, casting that last glance which all good housewives like to give everything, her husband knocked at the door. At that very moment a cursed hen, who had taken it into her head to get on top of the arbor to gorge herself with grapes, let fall a large lump of dirt right in the middle of the cloth. The poor woman was half dead with fright; so great was her despair, she could think of no other way of remedying the thoughtlessness of the fowl then by covering the unseemly patch with a plate in which she put the fine fruits taken at random from her pocket, losing sight altogether of the symmetry of the table. Then, in order that no one should notice it, she instantly fetched the soup, seated every one in his place, and begged them to enjoy themselves.

"Now, all of them seeing everything so well arranged, uttered exclamations of pleasure, except the diabolical husband, who remained moody and sullen, knitting his brows and looking for a straw on which to hang a quarrel with his wife. Thinking it safe to give him one for himself, her relations being present, she said to him, 'Here's your dinner, nice and hot, well served, the cloth is clean, the salt-cellar full, the plates clean, the wine fresh, the bread well baked. What is there lacking? What do you require? What do you desire? What else do you want?'

"'Oh, filth!' said he, in a great rage.

"The good woman instantly lifted the plate, and replied--

"'There you are, my dear!'

"Seeing which, the husband was dumbfounded, thinking that the devil was in league with his wife. He was immediately gravely reproached by the relations, who declared him to be in the wrong, abused him, and made more jokes at his expense than a recorder writes words in a month. From that time forward the sergeant lived comfortably and peaceably with his wife, who at the least appearance of temper on his part, would say to him--

"'Do you want some filth?'"

"'Who has told the worst now?'" cried the Anjou man, giving the host a tap on the shoulder.

"'He has! He has!'" said the two others. Then they began to dispute among themselves, like the holy fathers in council; seeking, by creating a confusion, throwing the glasses at each other, and jumping about, a lucky chance, to make a run of it.

"'I'll settle the question,'" cried the host, seeing that whereas they had all three been ready with their own accounts, not one of them was thinking of his.

They stopped terrified.

"'I will tell you a better one than all, then you will have to give ten sols a head.'"

"'Silence for the landlord,'" said the one from Anjou.

"'In our fauborg of Notre-dame la Riche, in which this inn is situated, there lived a beautiful



girl, who besides her natural advantages, had a good round sum in her keeping. Therefore, as soon as she was old enough, and strong enough to bear the matrimonial yoke, she had as many lovers as there are sols in St. Gatien's money-box on the Paschal-day. The girl chose one who, saving your presence, was as good a worker, night and day, as any two monks together. They were soon betrothed, and the marriage was arranged; but the joy of the first night did not draw nearer without occasioning some slight apprehensions to the lady, as she was liable, through an infirmity, to expel vapours, which came out like bombshells. Now, fearing that when thinking of something else, during the first night, she might give the reins to her eccentricities, she stated the case to her mother, whose assistance she invoked. That good lady informed her that this faculty of engineering wind was inherent in the family; that in her time she had been greatly embarrassed by it, but only in the earlier period of her life. God had been kind to her, and since the age of seven, she had evaporated nothing except on the last occasion when she had bestowed upon her dead husband a farewell blow. 'But,' said she to her daughter, 'I have ever a sure specific, left to me by my mother, which brings these surplus explosions to nothing, and exhales them noiselessly. By this means these sighs become odourless, and scandal is avoided.'

"The girl, much pleased, learned how to sail close to the wind, thanked her mother, and danced away merrily, storing up her flatulence like an organ-blower waiting for the first note of mass. Entering the nuptial chamber, she determined to expel it when getting into bed, but the fantastic element was beyond control. The husband came; I leave you to imagine how love's conflict sped. In the middle of the night, the bride arose under a false pretext, and quickly returned again; but when climbing into her place, the pent up force went off with such a loud discharge, that you would have thought with me that the curtains were split.

"Ha! I've missed my aim!" said she.

"Sdeath, my dear!" I replied, 'then spare your powder. You would earn a good living in the army with that artillery.'

"It was my wife."

"Ha! ha! ha!" went the clerks.

And they roared with laughter, holding their sides and complimenting their host.

"Did you ever hear a better story, Viscount?"

"Ah, what a story!"

"That is a story!"

"A master story!"

"The king of stories!"

"Ha, ha! It beats all the other stories hollow. After that I say there are no stories like the stories of our host."

"By the faith of a Christian, I never heard a better story in my life."

"Why, I can hear the report."

"I should like to kiss the orchestra."

"Ah! gentlemen," said the Burgundian, gravely, "we cannot leave without seeing the hostess, and if we do not ask to kiss this famous wind-instrument, it is a out of respect for so good a story-teller."

Thereupon they all exalted the host, his story, and his wife's trumpet so well that the old fellow, believing in these knaves' laughter and pompous eulogies, called to his wife. But as she did not come, the clerks said, not without frustrative intention, "Let us go to her."

Thereupon they all went out of the room. The host took the candle and went upstairs first, to light them and show them the way; but seeing the street door ajar, the rascals took to their heels, and were off like shadows, leaving the host to take in settlement of his account another of his wife's offerings.

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